

Sermon

Sunday, October 14, 2018

Charleston, SC

8:00 am & 10:30 am Sermon ~ Ephesians 1:3-14, John 3:9-17

The Gifts of God for the People of God

The Rev. David Booman

So this morning we begin our annual stewardship preaching series. And no, you can't leave now. We've barred the doors.

But actually, this may be one of the more unusual stewardship sermons you've ever had the *pleasure* of hearing. Because I'm not going to ask you to give or do anything. At all. Not once. Not even a slight twist of the arm. Not even a short little guilt trip.

No, instead, I'm simply going to ask you to receive what God wants to give you. Again, not give, but receive. So what sort of game am I playing at? Is this some kind of reverse psychology?

No my friends, the truth is, we cannot give until we have first received. We cannot bless others until we first receive God's blessing. This is the bedrock of all stewardship. And really, all ministry.

In our healing prayer class a few weeks ago I told the class, 'when you share a prayer request, don't ask for prayer for your cousin's, wife's, friend's, neighbor's Chiwawa—who has a sore tooth.' Because as much as God cares about that dog's tooth...he also cares for you! And there will be a much greater kingdom impact if *you* are transformed...and then go on and bless others. So take a leap of faith and ask for prayers for yourself.

St. Seraphim of Sarov once said, 'Find peace *yourself* and thousands around you will find peace.'

In my life I know that all the comfort and peace I can offer anyone flows out of the comfort and peace I have received. You know, I've prayed for *thousands* of people in my life. But I've only been able to do that because SO MANY people have prayed for me.

Every year I take a trip somewhere to receive a couple days of intensive prayer ministry...for the brokenness in my life. And I've found that it's out of *that*

ministry I am able to give the grace I have received.

So this morning I'd like to look at what God has given us. Because ultimately, far more important than what *we* give God, is what He has given us.

And it begins with the most famous verse in the Bible. John 3.16. *For God so loved the world that he GAVE his only begotten Son.* The God of the universe freely offered that which is most precious, His beloved son. And not just to hang out with us for a little bit and then go back to heaven. But to die for us.

Think of the darkest moment in your life. When you felt on the brink of despair. When you felt the walls closing in. Or think of the greatest physical pain you've ever felt. A kidney stone. Childbirth. Whatever it might be. God loves you so much that he was willing to bear all the sin and pain of the world, so He could give you abundant and eternal life.

If you can think of a greater gift than that, I'd like to hear it.

And amazingly, our very *capacity* to believe in Jesus is a gift. Faith itself is a gift. Romans 10 says, 'Faith comes through hearing and hearing through the word of Christ.' Faith is a gift we receive when Christ speaks into our hearts.

So Jesus is a gift. And the faith to receive Him is a gift. And when we believe in Christ, the floodgates of blessing really open up. In Ephesians we read, '*In Christ we have redemption through his blood.*

Forgiveness of our trespasses. According to the riches of His Grace.' Redemption. Forgiveness. The riches of his grace.

Riches means there's a lot there. A lot of grace the Lord wants to give us. As Jesus says in Matthew 7, 'How much more [than any earthly father] will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him.'

So for all you dads and moms out there. Think of the best gift you've ever

given your child. A moment when their face lit up with joy.

Jesus says, as glorious as that moment was. And as much as you enjoyed it, there's no comparison with God's desire to give good gifts to his children. All we need to do is ask.

But often we wrestle with this in prayer, don't we? Isn't it selfish for me to ask God for good things for myself? When there's a million people starving around the world. And the whales still need to be saved. Not to mention the spotted owls and world peace and the MN Vikings still need to win a Super Bowl.

No seriously, we do need to pray for those who are suffering. But we also need to pray for ourselves. And it's not either/or. It's not like there's only so much grace to go around. Remember, the *riches* of his grace. This is not Malthusian economics. It's not a zero-sum game. In the kingdom there is plenty for everybody.

And so neglecting to pray for yourself actually means you're missing out on blessings the Lord wants you to share with others.

What are the blessings? The gifts of God for the people of God? Where do we begin? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. The blood of the lamb to wash away our sins, the hope of the cross to strengthen us in dark places, the Word of God, our daily bread. The gift of the Holy Spirit, our comforter, advocate, and friend. Not to mention the charismata, the gifts of the Spirit...tongues, prophesy, healings, miracles.

I've mentioned this before, but I keep a piece of paper in my Bible with a list of miracles God has done in the last 12 years of my life. I have 92 items on this list. Times when God spared my life from near-fatal accidents. Physical healings, emotional healings, financial provision when I was desperate, people he's brought into my life

just when I needed them. Job opportunities, etc. One of the recent miracles was just this past year.

After our neighbor's house fire forced us out of our home, you, the people of St. Michael's rallied round in an incredible way. You offered us places to stay for months, while we figured things out—*And then* you blessed us with so many gifts and furniture while we got back on our feet. It was an astonishing outpouring of love. And through you, the body of Christ, we experienced the riches of His grace.

Now does this mean that if we follow Jesus we'll get health, wealth, and happiness? You know some preachers these days seem to suggest that if we follow Jesus we might as well start planning our vacation home on the French Riviera.

But no, when we look at the apostles—the guys who knew Jesus best and loved him most—we see that they suffered a lot. Poverty, persecution, torture etc. And while God blessed them with lots of miracles, he ultimately gave them something *better* than mere health, wealth, and happiness. He gave their lives meaning. He gave them joy in the midst of suffering. And He gave them the hope of glory.

And so we find Paul in prison, writing to the Philippians, chained to a Roman centurion. Not knowing if he's going to live or die. And yet he writes things like, 'I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making my prayer with joy.' Paul prays with joy. And then the famous exhortation in chapter 4: 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.'

Did you know it's hard to be depressed and grateful at the same time? Just try it. It doesn't work. And we see in Paul that the way to overcome suffering is gratitude. Gratitude for God's blessings! Life is a gift. And we can be grateful even in tough circumstances.

Matthew Henry, who wrote a commentary on the Bible, was once robbed on his way home. That's pretty depressing, getting robbed. But that night, before he went to bed, he took out his diary and wrote these words: "Let me be thankful—first, because I was never robbed before, second, because although they took my wallet, they did not take my life; third, because although they took my all, it was not much, and fourth, because it was I who was robbed and not I who robbed."

I'm also reminded of Richard Wurmbrandt. He was a pastor imprisoned for many years in the Soviet Union. Tortured, sometimes on an almost daily basis, for his faith. He wrote this: 'Alone in my cell, cold,

hungry and in rags, I danced for joy almost every night. Sometimes I was so filled with joy I felt I would burst if I did not give it expression.'

My friends, can you imagine a greater gift than this kind of Joy?

And so again, this morning I'm not asking you to give anything. Rather, I'm asking you to receive. I'm asking you to receive the riches of God's grace. What fruits of the spirit do you need in your life? What healing do you need in your life? What guidance do you need in your life? What joy? What breakthrough?

The apostle James writes, 'You do not have because you do not ask.' And so this morning let's stop striving and struggling in our own strength, and come boldly before the throne of grace.

In closing, Pastor Bill Johnson tells the story of being a foster parent to children coming out of horrific circumstances. And he observes that when foster children would first arrive at his home, their meals would be a free-for-all. The kids would grab all the food they could reach and then would guard their plates so no one else could touch it. Johnson writes, 'They showed us how orphans live...orphans live differently from children who know they're loved.'

Fortunately after a season of being truly cared for, the behavior would change. Once the kids knew that they could have all they wanted—and that tomorrow there would still be more than enough—they changed. They became peaceful. They became generous. They became joyful.

My friends are we living like orphans or like the sons and daughters of God? Are we struggling and striving and grasping and groaning, or are we trusting in the promises of Jesus Christ? 'I came' Jesus said 'that you might have life. And might have it abundantly.'

And so this morning let us open our hearts fully to the King of Glory, the one who comes bearing gifts for men.

Let us pray.

Gracious father, forgive us for living like orphans, when you've adopted us into your family. Help us to trust you, and help us to pray. Give us the childlike faith that inherits the kingdom. Guard us from sad resignation. Lord Jesus, you've shown us the heart of our Father and you've promised us the kingdom. By your Spirit open our lives to receive all you died to give us...that we might share your grace joyfully with others.